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NARRATIVE, ORGANIZATIONS AND RESEARCH¹

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ABSTRACT

Given the rapid expansion of narrative approaches in management and organization theory in recent years, this paper investigates the contribution of this literature to understanding of organizations and processes of organizing. The paper tells the story of the development of narrative approaches in organizational theory. Narrative's contribution to substantive areas of organization theory is evaluated. These developments are then reviewed in relation to an ongoing tension between story and science. We conclude by contemplating some of the criticisms, and the future, of narrative research.

INTRODUCTION

What is a good story worth? In a famous exchange of views published in the *Academy of Management Review* in 1991 Dyer and Wilkins argued that not only was the point of case research to produce an “exemplar”, “a story against which researchers can compare their experiences and gain rich theoretical insights” (p.613), but that the “classics” in organization studies “are good stories” (p.617). In reply, Eisenhardt (1991) contended that stories are not theories, and while “[g]ood storytelling may make ...studies entertaining to read... their theoretical impact comes from rigorous method and multiple-case comparative logic”

¹ The authors gratefully acknowledge the insightful comments of Mary Jo Hatch, Associate Editor Robert DeFillippi, and two anonymous reviewers, on earlier versions of this paper.

(p.621). This dialogue crystallizes a key theme that has come to characterize the development of narrative research in organization theory – the ongoing tension between stories and science. To explore this, we tell the story of the development of narrative research and assess the contribution it has made to organization theory more generally. Piecing together this story is important because despite the burgeoning of the literature on narrative since 1991 (e.g., Boje, 2001; Czarniawska, 1999; Gabriel, 2000), as yet there has been no attempt to assess systematically the value of this literature to our understanding of processes of organizing, or to consider critically its impact on our field.

In telling the story of narrative research, we recognize that our story, rather than just being a passive rendering of events, assumes “the double role of mimesis-mythos” (Kearney, 2002: 12). That is, story, unlike a chronology – a list of events in date order - is a “creative redescription of the world such that hidden patterns and hitherto unexplored meanings can unfold” (ibid: 12). An important implication of this observation is that any particular series of events can be incorporated in many different stories each of which is susceptible to multiple interpretations (Rhodes, 2001a). To author a story is always a creative act, and our story is just one of many that could be told about narrative research. Ours is not a quest for scientific truth, but a quest for meaning. This is a key issue that will form a main theme of the paper. In our terms, the ‘fact’ that any series of events can be narrated in a plurality of ways is less of a ‘problem’ for research; it is an issue that has as its core how researchers should take responsibility for their work (Rhodes and Brown, 2005). We have chosen to write this paper, to emplot the story of narrative research, in order that it might be better understood, appreciated and interrogated by those who use it. In these ways we hope to contribute to existing methodological dialogues.

The value of narrative methodologies is by no means undisputed. Even scholars who conduct case study research often express a profound unease when it is suggested that their

preferred representational strategy is a kind of story, and that such stories may appropriately be evaluated against literary criteria. As Lieblich, Tuval-Masiach and Zilber (1998: 1) have asserted, frequently the study of narrative “has been criticized as being more art than research”. Why art is not of value as knowledge is more often assumed than argued. It is to question such assumptions that we review and assess the impact of the concept and associated theories of narrative within organization studies. This task is important and over-due not only because of the large number of studies that now adopt the methods and vocabulary associated with various narratologies, but also because it is valuable for us to reflect on, and to problematize, the ways in which the organization theory literature is developing. We start by introducing the notion of narrative and tracing its development in organizational theory. We then examine five major areas of inquiry where narrative has been used in organization theory: (1) sensemaking, (2) communication, (3) politics and power, (4) learning/change, and (5) identity and identification. We next discuss the main theoretical contributions and limitations of this research before concluding with an assessment of criticisms, future challenges, and possible directions. In so doing, we make the point that organization theory is still limited by a meta-theoretical perspective that sees science and stories as separate domains, rather than different forms of knowledge. It is this unresolved conflict that characterizes the unfinished story of the development of narrative research.

NARRATIVE IN SOCIAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH

The development of narrative approaches is one symptom of the ‘linguistic turn’ that has occurred not just in organization studies but in the social sciences generally (Alvesson and Karreman, 2000; Deetz, 2003). Narratological concerns have been raised in disciplines as distinct as sociology (Ezzy, 1998; Maines, 1993; Somers, 1994), history (Carr, 1986; White, 1987), various branches of psychology (Sarbin, 1986; Rappaport, 2000; White and Epston, 1990), communication studies (Cooren, 1999; Fisher, 1984), folklore (Georges, 1969;

Robinson, 1981), anthropology (Geertz, 1988; Levi-Strauss, 1963) and philosophy (Ricoeur, 1983).

In organization theory in particular it has been suggested that “[o]rganizational story and storytelling research has produced a rich body of knowledge unavailable through other methods of analysis” (Stutts and Barker, 1999: 213), that the adoption of a narrative approach “may increase the relevance of organizational knowledge produced by academics” (Ng and de Cock, 2002: 25) and that the use of narrative approaches might encourage organization theory “to reinvigorate itself” (Czarniawska, 1998: 13). Boje (2001) has distinguished narratologies as distinct as living story, realism, formalism, pragmatism, social constructionism, post structuralism, critical theory, and postmodernism, each with its own preferred research agenda and constitutive assumptions. Yet, while the community for which narrative is a legitimate means of analyzing and representing human relations is in some ways disparate (Riessman, 1993: 16-17), it is cohered by a shared interest in work that “is informed by or centers on narrativity” (Fisher, 1985: 347), and research assumptions that favor pluralism, relativism and subjectivity (Lieblish, Tuval-Masiach and Zilber, 1998: 2). As Currie (1998) has argued, there is discernible “an abstract pool of resources drawn eclectically from different narratological histories” (p.14) that forms “a single body” (p.27) which “has converged into an increasingly shared vocabulary with increasingly similar objectives” (p.135).

The history of narrative in organization research is relatively brief, and the diverse understandings and deployment of narrative in organization theory noted above a very recent occurrence. The earliest explicit uses of narrative approaches to inform research methodology in management and organization theory date from the 1970s (e.g. Clark, 1972; Mitroff and Killman, 1976, 1978). Most commonly such studies took as their methodological position that stories, myths, sagas and other forms of narrative were an overlooked yet valuable source

of data for research in organizations. For example, in their 1976 study, Mitroff and Killman noted that, at the time, there had been little systematic study of organizational myths and stories as this was not considered to be the “proper focus of studies of the social sciences” (p. 191). Working against this dominant logic, they devised a research project which gathered short stories written by managers to express their concept of an ideal organization and compared it to the results of a short personality test based on a Jungian personality typology. Their methodological position was that stories gave the researcher access to the unconscious yet projective images of what the organization meant to the managers.

As the research focus on organizational culture and symbolism grew in the 1980s and 1990s so did the use of narratives to explore the meaning of organizational experience. Researchers recognized that story-telling was an important means through which managers acquired knowledge at work and suggested that stories be taken as a credible source of knowledge by scholars (Hummell, 1991). The emerging issue was how to use stories as “devices which peer into human desires, wishes, hopes and fears ... [where] ... the best stories are those which stir people’s minds, hearts and souls and by doing so give them new insights into themselves, their problems and their human condition. The challenge is to develop a human science that more fully serves this aim” (Mitroff and Kilmann, 1978). Building on arguments such as these, researchers sought new ways to incorporate stories into research. Often located within a social constructivist framework (Boyce, 1996) the use of narratives as data enabled researchers to examine emotional and symbolic lives within organizations (Van Buskirk and McGrath, 1992; Gabriel, 1998).

Complementing the idea that people in organizations are storytellers and that their stories constituted valid empirical materials for research, a related methodological position soon began to be articulated which recognized that researchers too are storytellers. As well as pioneering new ways of using narratives as empirical materials, researchers have also

developed new methodological positions in terms of the narrative nature of research itself. In reviewing case studies in organization and management theory, Dyer and Wilkins (1991) made the observation that such studies gain their power from their narrative elements rather than just their abstract concepts. They suggested that these stories use the theory as a plot and are highly effective and persuasive means of communicating research (especially in contrast to statistical demonstrations of theory). What was recognized was that disciplines in the social sciences ranging from sociology to ethnography and to organization studies had long been founded on the ability to tell a good story (Clegg, 1993) such that although not traditionally a trademark of scientific texts, narrative is always present in them (Czarniawska, 1999). Research tended to use the term ‘story’ rather than ‘narrative’, to treat organizational stories as *in vivo* artifacts, and to emphasize that their importance derived from the insights they provided on other aspects of organization, such as how control is exercised (Wilkins, 1983) and organizational distinctiveness claimed (Martin, et. al., 1983).

Today, the story is much more multi-faceted – narratives are recognized not only as a form of data (Mitroff and Killman, 1976), but also as a theoretical lens (Pentland, 1999), a methodological approach (Boje, 2001), and various combinations of these. Narrative, and its near conceptual neighbors such as story (Boje, 1995), fantasy (Gabriel, 1995), saga (Clark, 1972) and myth (Kaye, 1995) have been implicated in studies of processes of socialization (Brown, 1982), learning (Tenkasi and Bolman, 1993) strategic individuality (Harfield and Hamilton, 1997), the exercise of power and control (Mumby, 1987), sensemaking (Brown, 1986), culture formation (Jordan, 1996), collective centering (Boyce, 1996), community mediation (Cobb, 1993), IT implementation (Brown, 1998), and even the policy decisions of academic journals (Boje, Fitzgibbons and Steingard, 1996). This wealth of work from those who collect stories told in organizations (Martin et al., 1983), tell stories about organizations (Van Maanen, 1988), define organizations as storytelling systems (Boje, 1991a; Currie and

Brown, 2003), and conceptualize organization studies as a set of storytelling practices (Clegg, 1993; Czarniawska, 1999; Hatch, 1996) is both indicative and constitutive of narrative's impact.

USING NARRATIVE RESEARCH TO STUDY ORGANIZATIONS

To examine the substantive contribution of narrative research, in this section we continue our story by discussing five of the principal research areas within organization studies to which narrative has been directed: (1) sensemaking, (2) communication, (3) politics and power, (4) learning/change, and (5) identity and identification. In considering these fields we seek to demonstrate the depth and reach of the contribution of narrative to organization theory.

Narrative Sensemaking

There is a broad consensus among narrative scholars that sensemaking refers to processes of narrativization (MacIntyre, 1981), that our versions of reality take narrative form (Bruner, 1991), and that stories are means of interpreting and infusing events with meaning (Gabriel, 2000). Further, the recognition that "...the performance of stories is a key part of members' sensemaking" (Boje, 1995: 1000) in organizations emphasizes that people understand complex events in ways which are integrated and temporally coherent rather than, for example, as atemporal and disconnected "frameworks" (Cantril, 1941: 20). As Weick (1995) argues, stories are pivotal to sensemaking because they aid comprehension, suggest a causal order for events, enable people to talk about absent things, act as mnemonics, guide action and convey shared values and meanings. There is a wealth of theoretical and empirical work that suggests stories help participants reduce "the equivocality (complexity, ambiguity, unpredictability) of organizational life" (Brown and Kreps, 1993: 48), are "...the main source of knowledge in the practice of organizing" (Czarniawska, 1997: 5-6), and "...can be used to predict future organizational behavior" (Martin, 1992: 287). Key to this is the use of narrative order to delineate emplotment and causality out of potentially chaotic and *disorganized*

(Cooper 1990) life at work. The presence of a plot in stories constructs the passage from one state of affairs to another (Czarniawska, 2004) so that the sensemaking that is done through narrative will always be temporal rather than static.

A sensemaking perspective sees organizations are narratively constructed (Bruner, 1991) from “networks of conversations” (Ford, 1999: 485). Within such processes, however, it is always possible for different potential meanings to emerge through the social and political processes of sensemaking. Narrative sensemaking thus attests to the pluralization of possible ways that sense can be made. Recognition of this has permitted researchers to study the different ways in which elaborated narratives and narrative fragments are or are not sufficiently consistent and continuous to maintain and objectify reality for participants. More than this, narratives “are the style and substance of life” (Tribble, 1984: 1) through which “identities, moral orders and relational patterns are constructed” (Cobb and Rifkin, 1991: 71) out of the multitude of subject positions socially available.

Theorists with postmodern inclinations have gone so far as to say that stories should be regarded as ontologically prior to sensemaking, and that what people seek to make sense of are not events themselves, but accounts of them. Storytelling, then, has also been considered as a way that people reflexively make sense of organizations and organizational life and infuse their working lives with meaning. Accordingly, there is no “other reality” to find under or behind narratives, because narratives form “the very texture of events” (Skoldberg, 1994: 233) and the means through which organizations are reflexively constructed. In addition, this suggests that in appraising any given narrative “there is no single *basically* basic story subsisting beneath it but, rather, an unlimited number of other narratives that can be *constructed in response* to it or *perceived as related* to it” (Smith, 1981: 217). The reflexivity of narrative sensemaking thus assumes that language “affects what we see and even the logic we use to structure our thought” (Thatchenkery, 2001: 115) such that

narratives are structures through which events are made sense of rather than just being representations which convey meaning.

It has been claimed that “The ultimate lack of sense is when you cannot produce a narrative to go with a situation” (Wallemacq and Sims, 1998: 121). Generally understood as those processes of meaning production whereby people subjectively interpret phenomena and produce inter-subjective accounts (Weick, 1995), processes of sensemaking are widely regarded as vital to our capacity to successfully organize. In particular, Orr’s (1990) study of photocopy repair technicians and Patriotta’s (2003) research on shop floor operatives both suggest that narratives are fundamental diagnostic tools that foster the spread of common understandings within communities of workers. This reflects a foundational assumption of the literature which suggests that humans are, either by nature (Brown, 1986 :73) or as a result of socialization processes (Goody and Watt, 1962-3; Krashen, 1982) predisposed to think in storied form. Extending Burke’s (1968) definition of man as a symbol-using animal, our species has been referred to as “*homo narrans*” by a communication theorist (Fisher, 1984: 6), “*homo fabulans* – the tellers and interpreters of narrative” by a literary theorist (Currie, 1998: 2), and as “essentially a story-telling animal” by a moral philosopher (MacIntyre, 1981: 201). Sociologists have defined a person “as a self-narrating organism” (Maines, 1993: 23; Ezzy, 1998), the historian White (1981: 1) has described the “impulse to narrate” as “natural”, and psychologists of various hues have characterized narrative as “a primary cognitive instrument” (Mink, 1978: 131; Polkinghorne, 1988: 1) that underlies our thinking and emotional life (Rappaport, 2000: 40), as an agent of both memory (Bower and Clark, 1969) and meaning (Bruner, 1990). In organization studies, Boland and Tenkasi (1995) have argued that narratives constitute the basic organizing principle of human cognition.

Communicating With Stories

As a form of communication, narrative has been employed by examining the stories that people in organizations tell one another in order to describe past or anticipated events, relationships, successes, failures and emotions (Jones, 1990; Boje, 1991b). Inherent in this approach is the view that people use narratives to order their experience as they make sense of it. Rather than regarding communication as a form of transmission (Brown, 1985) narrative recasts communication as a form of symbolic action (Weick and Browning, 1986) that provides sequence, meaning and structure for those who live, create or invent stories (Fisher, 1984, 1985; Browning, 1992). This has enabled researchers to study communication as a means through which organizational reality is reflexively constructed through discursive action (Cooren, 1999). Such action is mediated through stories where stories are understood as symbolic forms of discourse that are a “framework for reality construction in the organization” (Brown, 1986: 80), that provide a common symbolic ground for organizational culture (Bormann, 1994) and enable the creation, transformation and maintenance of that culture (Myrsiades, 1987). Narratives are thus regarded as the means through which experience is reflexively reconstituted, made meaningful, and made communicable. This is a *constitutive reflexivity* that sees accounts of the world as constituting the affairs that they speak of (Macbeth, 2001).

Central to communication is the form of temporal sequencing that narratives perform (Fisher, 1984, 1985; Browning, 1992). This involves assembling and re-assembling events as they are experienced into meaningfully temporalized narratives through which symbolic meaning and causal explanations can be inter-subjectively discussed, contested and (perhaps) agreed upon. The temporalized expression of the meaning of organizational events is achieved by imposing narrativity on to those events, no one narration is necessarily correct, true or accurate, but rather that there are “as many narratives as there are actors” (Cooren, 1999: 301; see also Boje, 1995). A distinct feature of narrative approaches has been the study

of how different forms of communicative narration can produce different organizational realities that exist simultaneously (Boje, Luhman and Baack, 1999). Thus an organization can be regarded as a “multidiscursive and precarious effect or product” (Law, 1994: 250) – a “storytelling organization” (Boje, 1991a, 1995) that is enacted both through stories and through the genres in which they are told (Rhodes, 2001a). This is in contrast with the more traditional approaches to organizational communication that regard organizations as closed systems with no contests over meaning (May, 1994). Attention to plurality has enabled researchers to focus on how competing narratively embodied interpretations interact and how some stories become dominant and others marginalized (Aaltio-Marjosola, 1994; Boje, 1995).

Communications reflect the everyday dramas which people in organizations find important and these can both support and oppose managerial narratives (Brown and McMillan, 1991). Narrative theory has been used to argue that communication is not about objective facts that exist independent of the person or groups through which they are transmitted. Rather, stories are subjective and inter-subjective accounts of experience. The value of studying stories is that they are “inherent and powerful in organizational communication” (Smith and Keyton, 2001: 174); they are “the blood vessels through which changes pulsate in the heart of organizational life” (Boje 1991b: 8) and are “vehicles of communication management” (Kaye 1995: 1). From this perspective, storytelling is an important aspect of managerial behavior (Irwin and More, 1993; Kaye, 1995; Morgan and Dennehy 1997). Stories are a device through which managers’ work to inform employees about their preferred organizational cultures (Wilkins 1984) and provide managers with a form of social and inter-subjective interaction that reflects belief systems, role expectations, interpersonal norms and conditions for work behavior (Hansen and Kahnweiler, 1993; Irwin and More, 1993). These stories are of value to researchers because they contain the subject-

specific morals and beliefs of the people telling them (Martin, 1982; Hansen and Kahnweiler, 1993), serve as vehicles for community memory (Orr, 1990), and socialize people into organizational norms (Brown, 1985). Stories are, thus, important to the study of organizational communication because they are central in creating and maintaining corporate culture (Weick and Browning, 1986), and legitimizing “the power structure within a group or organization” (Brown, 1986: 78-79). Such communication processes involve the co-production of organizational realities through particular instances of story performances (Boje, 1991a). The active nature of such story-telling attests to the way that communication is subjectively enacted within given social and cultural meaning structures rather than being transmission based.

Narrative, Change and Learning

The development of narrative approaches has also been extended into the study of organizational change and learning. Such approaches draw heavily on the notion of narrative as a form of temporal order in that, like narrative, change is a time-based construct. While some theorists have argued that organizational changes are often constituted by changes in the narratives that participants author (e.g., Brown and Humphreys, 2003), the major focus of this literature has been on how stories are a way of managing change in organizational culture. In particular, stories achieve this by encapsulating and entrenching organizational values (Meyer, 1995), and by encouraging people in organizations to reformulate the meanings associated with organizational stories of both the past and the future (Wilkins, 1984; Kelly, 1985; McConkie and Wayne, 1986; McConkie and Boss, 1986; Feldman, 1990; Kaye, 1995). In this respect, stories are a “powerful media for bringing about changes in people and in the culture of their workplace” (Kaye, 1995: 1). These stories are said to relate the unstated norms that inform managerial rhetoric about organizational change (Feldman and Skoldberg, 2002), as well as enabling the development of rich models of change and

decision making that capture its complexity and detail (Stevenson and Greenberg, 1998).

In terms of strategic change, stories have been theorized as diagnostic aids that people use to understand organizational norms and values, as management tools to involve people in the change process, and as means for helping people envision potential future realities from creative interpretations of the past (Boje, 1991b; McConkie and Boss, 1994; Barry and Elmes, 1997). By linking past, present and future, such stories are said to be able to produce liminal conditions between current realities and future possibilities by constructing an ‘as if’ reality that helps people deal with ambiguity and change and thus helps create new and apparently legitimate structural conditions (Feldman, 1990).

Narrative approaches have also contributed to understanding how particular meanings ascribed to organizational changes become dominant (Rhodes 2001a). Stories that circulate culturally across organizations have been seen to provide accepted scripts through which to understand the dynamics of different organizational cultures (Martin, et. al. 1983). Stories are in this sense relational processes (Abma, 2003) that allow collective action to be instigated (Gold, 1997). During change efforts these collective stories can act as a means of social control that prescribe or reinforce managerially preferred behaviors and values (McConkie and Boss, 1986). This has led to suggestions that “we need theories of change and consulting from a multiple narrative perspective” (Boje, 1994: 457) and that these should be analyzed *in situ* as embedded in organizational dialogues (Rhodes, 2000b). Such dialogues stand in opposition to managerial monologues or ‘grand stories’ (Aaltio-Marjosola, 1994) that enable hegemony to masquerade as consensus (Rhodes, 2000b). To create dialogue, stories have also been employed as forms of organizational development intervention through the use of storytelling workshops which elicit ‘counter stories’ in order to challenge existing and outmoded ways of working (Abma, 2000, 2003). Such interventions have also been studied in their function of introducing the voices of those who were hitherto unheard in organizational

dialogues (Boje, 1991b; Humphreys and Brown, 2002a,b).

Another critical contribution of narrative research to the study of change has been an examination of how people in organizations construct their own narratives about change that can be inconsistent with those story-lines centrally promulgated (Rhodes, 2000a; Vaara, 2002). This suggests that the meanings attached to change are not fixed or determined, but rather that people are reflexively engaged in developing their own interpretations of, and reactions to, change. The use of different narrative strategies has even been shown to enable what were previously regarded as failed change projects to be re-narrated as successful, and vice versa (Vaara, 2002). It has also been demonstrated that stories can serve as means to provide legitimacy for organizational changes that might otherwise have been considered illegitimate, irrational or unnecessary (Rhodes, 1997). In this sense, the meaning of change is reflexively constructed rather than being inherent in the material events that constitute the change. Further, stories can provide a means for managers to exonerate themselves from responsibility for failed change efforts (Brown and Jones, 1998; Vaara, 2002) and for founders of new organizations to justify the existence of them, and convince others to invest in them (O'Connor, 2002).

The relationship between narrative and learning based approaches to organizational change is well established at both organizational and inter-subjective levels (Vance, 1991; Tenkasi and Boland, 1993; Taylor, Fisher and Dufresne, 2002). Here learning is understood as occurring within the subjectively and inter-subjectively accepted structures of meaning embedded in repeated stories (Levitt and March, 1988); stories which encapsulate the complexity of practice better than static or abstract models. These stories can be regarded as stores of collective memory communicated and institutionalized through repetition (Orr, 1990; Weick and Roberts, 1993) that can be re-narrated to produce a “diagnostic bricolage” (Orr 1990: 185) used to solve novel problems. In this way, stories are a means of learning

that communities use collectively and contextually to change and improve practice (Kreps, 1990; Brown and Duguid, 1991). Stories can thus foster ‘learning-in-organizing’ when change emerges from dialogue between the many different possible ways of re-narrating the organization (Abma, 2000). The circulation of such stories in organizations has also been shown to be a way of sensitizing managers to other ways of understanding their organizational realities, helping them develop new insights, stimulating critical thought and enabling problems to be analyzed and solved in novel and more effective ways (Mitroff and Kilmann, 1975; Gold and Holman, 2001; Gold, Holman and Thorpe, 2002). For researchers, this has meant that stories can be analyzed in terms of how they help people subjectively make sense of the strategic reasons for change in relation to the meaning structures in organizations more generally (Dunford and Jones, 2000).

The Power and Politics of Narrative

Studying power from a narrative perspective enables it to be understood as a dynamic phenomenon, the form and enactment of which is subject to change over time. From a perspective which suggests that organizations are “domains of legitimate authority” (Mumby and Stohl, 1991: 315), narratives are regarded as a significant means by which organizations are discursively constructed and, importantly, reconstructed as regimes of ‘truth’ (e.g., Clegg, 1989). The plasticity and interpretative flexibility of narratives also makes them particularly well suited to use in political games where individuals and coalitions need often to present information differently to different audiences in order to secure acquiescence and enthusiasm (Brown, 1985; Brown and Kreps, 1993). Interestingly, analyses of political activity suggest that it is those narratives which are most coherent and earliest promulgated that tend to prevail, while those that are less coherent, or developed secondarily, are more likely to become marginalized or colonized by other accounts (Cobb and Rifkin, 1991; Cobb, 1993). On this reading, narratives are a potent political form that dramatize control and compel

belief while shielding truth claims from testing and debate, and command attention and memory, often without exciting argumentative challenge (Witten, 1993: 100). In this sense, power is understood as an attempt to stabilize meaning structures over time. However, in practice such stabilizations are best regarded as temporary. As Clegg (1989: 152) describes it, “there is no reason to expect that representations will remain contextually and historically stable, but every reason to think that they will shift”.

The importance of shared narratives in creating and sustaining organizations as fractured and hierarchical locales in which individuals and groups are enmeshed in reciprocal but asymmetric power relationships has been widely discussed (Brown, 1998; Boje, 1995; Czarniawska, 1997). Narratives structure systems of presence and absence in organizations, insinuating particular sets of meanings into everyday practices, which are represented as authoritative, while excluding alternative conceptions (Hall, 1985: 109; Westwood and Linstead, 2001: 111). Following Foucault (1979), narratives are a form of discursive practice that functions as a disciplinary form, constituting organizational participants, actions and relationships in particular ways. The focus of study thus turns to how particular dominant narratives emerge from a multitude of possibilities, and the task of the researcher is to analyze which narratives dominate (and which do not) and how they came to do so. Often this means examining the disputation between more and less powerful narratives (Keleman and Hassard, 2003). Further, although particular narratives might be more powerful than others they are rarely monolithic, and narrative approaches have been used to theorize organizations as ‘heteroglossic’ (Bakhtin, 1981) entities in which competing centripetal and centrifugal forces operate through multiple, often partially overlapping narratives, creating and sustaining polyphonic and plurivocal societies (Rhodes, 2000b).

From a micro-perspective, narratives have also been recognized as important political tools. Narratives are, then, simultaneously “the ground on which the struggle for power is

waged, the object of strategies of domination, and the means by which the struggle is actually engaged and achieved” (Westwood and Linstead, 2001: 10). Narrative researchers have been concerned with the way that narrative is used to reflexively reproduce power relations and the way that researchers too are embedded in those relationships (Boje, Luhman and Baack, 1999). The issue that arises is “not only the language of power but also the power of the language of power” (Clegg, 1993: 40). Pertinent questions raised for researchers are: who gets included in the research? Which stories are privileged? Who is silenced? These in turn raise questions concerning how “certain discursive positions embraced by researchers will seek consensus by reinforcing prevailing language; [and how] other positions will attempt to destabilize and challenge the status quo” (Keleman and Hassard, 2003: 80). Most differences, however, will have their impact through being encoded in narratives that render such distinctions salient, memorable, and meaningful (Brown, 1998). Researchers’ roles in this process are central to understanding their position in the power relations they are studying, as writers unavoidably intervene in the representations they create, and the stories they tell, where these acts of representation also suppress alternatives (Linstead, 1993; Law, 1994).

Scholars interested in power and organization, have often linked narratives to notions of hegemony and legitimacy as they relate to subjectivity. Drawing on Gramsci (1971), hegemony is generally understood to refer to “the successful mobilization and reproduction of the active consent of dominated groups” (Clegg, 1989: 160). Hegemonic domination is never completely fixed or permanent but, rather, always subject to re-negotiation, a constant work-in-progress. Nor is it ever complete, for “no hegemonic logic can account for the totality of the social and constitute its centre” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 142). The interplay of different hegemonic claims is, however, discernible through an analysis of the shared narratives of different hegemonic groups (Humphreys and Brown, 2002a,b) which imprison those subject to them by denying contradictions, naturalizing inequalities and re-presenting

minority interests as universal, fixed and immutable (Clair, 1993; Mumby, 1987). It is through such processes that subjectivity, at it is narratively embodied, is deeply connected to “complex socio-cultural, behavioral and emotional disciplinary regimes” (Iedema, 2003: 32). Narrative approaches enable subjectivity to be understood as being, at least in part, a product of socio-cultural narratives that seek to define particular ways of being (Chappell et al, 2003).

Identifying With Narratives

It has been variously suggested that the identities of individuals are constituted through processes of narration (Carr, 1986: 5), that identities exist only as narratives (Currie, 1998: 17), and that life is an enacted narrative (MacIntyre, 1981) that is plotted over time (Chappell et al, 2003). These narratives are generally recognized to be appropriated from the grand narratives of the communities and cultures to which an individual belongs (Rappaport, 2000: 6), and to be “punctuated by gaps and uncertainties” (Wiener and Rosenwald, 1993: 30) while also exhibiting a reasonable degree of integration and coherence over time (Grotevant, 1993: 123). Indeed, the relationship between temporalization and identity has been the subject of intense debates in phenomenological approaches to philosophy. Within such debates is a contest over whether identity is best regarded as that aspect of a person that is stable and enduring over time, or whether identity is more malleable within temporal structures. In organizational research, the most common approach has been to regard identity as a form of self-narrative (Gergen and Gergen, 1988), which can then be used to explain how workers are “enjoined to incorporate the new managerial discourses into [their]...self-identity” (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002: 622).

Perhaps the greatest value that narrative has brought to the study of identity rests in a consideration of the many possible identities that organizational members can adopt and the ways in which particular identities strive for dominance. Importantly, there is a consensual

acknowledgement that solitary narrators do not have *carte blanche*, but are constrained in the stories they tell about themselves, not least by the cultural resources at their disposal and the expectations of others (Rosenwald and Ochberg, 1992: 9). Less sanguine theorists tend to describe narrative identities as power effects, arguing that “[w]e come to be who we are (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives rarely of our own making” (Somers, 1994: 606). Within organization studies a considerable volume of work has been conducted which supports the view that narratives are “[a] highly effective way of analyzing how identities are continuously constructed” (Gabriel, 1999: 196). In particular, critical theorists have argued that narratives provide an insightful means of analyzing subjectively construed identities as complex outcomes of processes of subjugation and resistance that are contingent and perpetually shifting (Jermier, Knights and Nord, 1994; Rose, 1989). Together, these approaches coalesce around the idea that the identity of a person is not fixed, but rather arises from the many possible cultural forms of identification available.

Narratological approaches to understanding identity offer especially interesting means of exploring the phenomenon of identification in terms of how individuals’ beliefs about their organizations become self-reflexively defined (Pratt, 1998: 172). Albert (1998: 12), for example, has argued that identification processes:

“are best described in narrative and qualitative terms...and are therefore linked to and legitimated by studies of narrative and by the continuing development of qualitative approaches”.

Other scholars have contended that stories function to promote identification (Brown, 1985), that participants express understanding and commitment to organizations through stories, and that members’ degree of familiarity with dominant organizational stories may indicate their level of adaptation to the organization (Brown, 1982; McWhinney, 1984). It is by means of

identification narratives that people consciously and unconsciously elaborate and re-elaborate their relationship with the organizations to which they belong, centering themselves (Bowles, 1989) as ambivalent, detached, or committed (Elsbach, 1999). The central contention here is that, in any given instance, the nature of the integration (Pratt, 1998) or fusion (Ashforth, 1998: 269) of the individual self and the organization implied by an identification relationship can valuably be researched through the self-narratives that a person authors.

Narrative has been implicated not just in conceptions of individual identity, but the identity of groups (including those based on ethnicity and gender), organizations, communities, and even entire nations (Currie, 1998: 2). The theoretical basis for understanding collective identities as, and through, the narratives that they author has been sketched by Carr (1986: 128) who argues that narration “is what constitutes the community” in the sense that narratives establish and maintain connections between people who may or may not know each other personally. Empirical explorations of collective identity narratives have been conducted by community psychologists, who have asserted that “Community narratives are central to the identity of the community” (Stuber, 2000: 509), and that “A community cannot be a community without a shared narrative” (Rappaport, 2000: 6). Similarly, organizational scientists have described narratives as expressive of organizational distinctiveness (Clark, 1970, 1972), vehicles for uniqueness claims (Martin, et. al., 1983), and as means for “collective centering” (Boyce, 1996). Empirical research suggests that frequently told tales help to establish and maintain organizational identity (McWhinney and Battista, 1988: 46), that organizations “exist to tell their collective stories” (Boje, 1995: 1000), and that “[o]rganizations need a coherent narrative just as [individual] humans do” (Czarniawska, 1997: 24). It is through the investigation and analysis of the narratives that participants author about their groups, departments and organizations that we may come to a sophisticated understanding of working lives (Humphreys and Brown 2002a,b; Terkel, 1972).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

So far we have provided a literature review of five main areas of organization research where narrative based approaches have been applied, and assessed the theoretical value that they have added. In this section, we develop our story further by considering these studies collectively in terms of the main contributions, implications and limitations of narrative research. We argue that while narrative has developed as a sophisticated research methodology, its exclusion from, and opposition to, a narrowly defined scientific paradigm in organization theory imposes limitations on its further development, and on the development of organization theory itself. Narrative methodologies emphasize aspects of organization, and organization theory, such as temporality, plurality, reflexivity and subjectivity, that are underplayed by traditional approaches. Further, we suggest that science and stories are both important in organization research, and that attention to one need not necessarily preclude understanding of the other.

The Contribution of Narrative Research

One key contribution of narrative research is the attention it focuses on temporal issues in organizations. Narrative involves the unfolding of a story of events and experiences over time. Emplotment is a key feature of narrative, and “plot requires a pre-understanding of time and temporal structures” (Boje, 2001: 113), so by invoking narrative one is concomitantly employing time as a central organizing concept. In this sense, narrative detaches observations in time rather than regarding those observations as “a logically formulated set of principles valid at all times” (Czarniawska, 1997: 174). Thus, rather than viewing organizations as static, homogeneous and consistent entities, narrative approaches demonstrate the processual characteristics of organizations and can render both the paradoxes and complex causal relationships inherent in organizational change open to analysis.

Narrative research also has value because it permits consideration of the different

possible meanings of organizational action (Boje, 1995; Rhodes, 2001a). This has enabled research to focus not only on the object of study (what is narrated) as a singular reality, but on the plurality of different possible stories and storytellers. This feature implies an appreciation that any given narrative structuring is not necessarily implicit in what is being studied, but rather that narrative is a form of ordering that is imposed on what is being studied in order to make sense of organizational phenomena. By implication, it is recognized that there is more than one way to tell a story and that ‘multiple voicing’ (Gergen and Gergen, 2000) is always possible. Such pluralization draws attention to a ‘crisis of validity’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) such that narrative can generate different and potentially competing stories which highlight that knowledge about organizations is actively constructed rather than a stable entity to be explicated.

Recognizing the multiple ways that stories can be told encourages a view of organizations as actively constructed through discursive activity. By implication, both researchers and people in organizations are actively involved in the narrative reconstitution of organizations, and the choices made about what is included and excluded in the stories that are told and re-told by researchers. When research is re-cast as a process of telling stories about stories then the means by which those stories are created is an important area for analysis and methodological reflection. This draws attention to the reflexivity inherent in the research enterprise – an issue that has been said to be a primary innovation in recent developments in qualitative methodologies more generally (Gergen and Gergen, 2000).

Narrative theorizing represents a move away from the “aperspectival sense of objectivity with the realist ontology that typifies much of organization science” (McKinley, 2003: 142). Instead, narrative has been used to study organizations in relation to the subjective interactions that produce narrated meanings, (including those of the researcher), as well as a problematization of the very definition of what we mean by a ‘subject’ *qua* person.

This is an epistemological position that the “knower and respondent cocreate understandings” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003: 35), including understandings of who they are and their relation to others. Thus, narratives are means through which organizations are brought to life in the different ways that people can construct meaning and identity from organizational events and experiences. The organization is not regarded as an object of study, but seen rather to be subjectively and inter-subjectively constructed through the stories told by both researchers and organizational stakeholders.

Narrative research across the social sciences collectively illustrates and elaborates a unique perspective on the human condition in general and organizational life in particular. By listening to, documenting, analyzing and reporting the different stories that people tell about their organizations, narrative researchers have sought to bring the subjective experience of people in organizations within the focus of research (Gabriel, 1998). This concern with subjectivity and inter-subjectivity has meant that many narrative researchers have become increasingly sensitive to organizations as sites of plural and contested meaning; including a reflexive sensitivity to the researcher’s own role as a teller of stories about organizations (Rhodes, 2001a). From such a perspective, organizations are understood not as singular and objective, but rather as resulting from different perspectives and accounts where it is possible that what we call an ‘organization’ can mean different things to different people (Thatchenkery, 1992; Walter-Busch, 1995). This leads to the study of organizations as socially constructed verbal systems where each person who is part of the organization has a voice, but where some voices are louder, more articulate and more powerful than others (Hazen, 1993).

The researcher’s attention is thus not only placed on the individual accounts of people in organizations, but also on the organization as a network of interrelated narrative interpretations (Phillips and Brown, 1993; Boje, 1995) formed from a “pluralistic

construction of a multiplicity of stories, storytellers and story performance” (Boje, 1995: 1000). This enables researchers to examine and compare narratives as different ‘takes’ on an organization and to study the different ways of telling stories about what is ostensibly the same organization or the same incident (Law, 1994; Gabriel, 1995; Rhodes, 2000a, 2001a). Researchers using narrative approaches need both to be aware of the different stories told in organizations and to seek new ways of representing them that do not subsume the multiplicity of stories in to a single authoritative account (Aaltio-Marjosola, 1994; Salzer-Morling, 1998; Rhodes, 2001a). Further, it alerts us to the requirement for reflexivity in research such that researchers’ realize that they too are telling stories, and selecting which stories are told (Hatch, 1996; Rhodes, 2001a).

Implications for Research: Stories and Science

Narrative methods have contributed broadly to research in organization theory – the implications of which are significant not only to methods and processes, but to the whole conceptualization of the research enterprise. The idea that narrative constitutes a kind of methodology (or set of methodologies) has played an important part in questioning conventional scientific approaches that define narratives and stories in opposition to fact and in subordination to theory and science (Mitroff and Kilmann, 1976; Daft, 1983; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995; Jacobson and Jacques, 1997; Gabriel, 1998). Researchers who use narrative methods have argued that stories and facts are not mutually exclusive categories (Gabriel 1991) and that narrative can provide new sources of empirical material beyond those available to ‘normal science’ (Mitroff and Killman, 1976, 1978; Hummell, 1991; Phillips, 1995; Gabriel, 1998), more effective means of representing and communicating research (Daft, 1983; Dyer and Wilkins, 1991; Watson 2000; Rhodes 2001a), and sharper analytical tools for research (Hatch, 1996; Phillips, 1995; Czarniawska, 1997; Pentland, 1999)ⁱ. This has marked an important departure from positivistic research methodologies which maintain

that “science should keep to facts and logic, leaving metaphors and stories to literature, this being a sediment of premodern times and oral societies” (Czarniawska, 1998: 7). Narratological methodologies have not only questioned seriously such a marginalization of narrative, but have also achieved a partial reunification such that organizational knowledge might develop from a broader epistemological ambit. Narrative is not just based on a negative critique of other methodologies, it also demonstrates real alternative with substantive analytical benefits.

It has been suggested that the scientific foundations of management research have created conditions for “the researcher to be neutral, detached or not engaged in the phenomena under study, free from context, and self referencing ... [which] ... leads one on the path of disengagement from and abstraction of the variety of management phenomena under study” (Mackenzie, Rahim and Golembiewski, 2002: 302). Such forms of management research are pre-occupied with finding theories “about how every organization has to work, how every employee is motivated, how all top teams work together or don’t” (Nord, 2004: 130). Contra such perspectives on science, an achievement of narrative research has been a reconsideration of positions with respect to research methodology which are increasingly regarded as being idealistic in their ethos and spurious in their claims (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). As Wicks and Freeman (1998) have argued, it is a mistake to suggest that science provides an “*anarrative*” and factual way of looking at the world that goes beyond the subjectivity of storytelling. Further, claims to do so constitute a political means through which to posit a transcendent narrative that operates outside of the contested and subjective meanings that are ascribed to work in both theory and practice. Being explicit about narrative denies claims to transcendence and enables the localities of practice to be examined in terms of their complexity, contradictions and multivocality. It is in these ways that narrative offers the possibility of retreating from abstraction in a way that engages with the experiences of

work, management and organizing.

It is the ability to reflexively engage with the lived experience of work that is a key methodological advantage of narrative approaches. As Zald (1996) argues “narrative and rhetorical techniques ... can be used to examine how people in organizations represent and construct their lives” (p. 254). Such ‘everyday’ understandings of work and management, however, often go unaccounted for in scholarship. Further, when they are considered, they are taken as something to be analyzed and not something that might have epistemic value. Pearce (2004) has suggested that management scholars tend to inhabit two parallel intellectual worlds – the world of scholarship and the world of ‘folk wisdom’. The former involves thoughtful intellectual work and careful methodological application, while the latter emerges from experience and culture. For Pearce, it is the world of folk wisdom that is underappreciated and relatively unexamined in management research. As he suggests, a core reason for this is the culture of scholarship that finds such folk wisdom to be inferior or irrelevant because of its lack of scholarly legitimacy. Nevertheless, he suggests that folk wisdom has “more value than we are willing to admit” (Pearce, 2004: 176). Our argument is that narrative methods have the potential to dissolve the duality between traditional scholarship and subjective experience in a way that is methodologically sophisticated and theoretically justified. The value of this is particularly relevant at a time when “the dominant positivist language game of organizational analysis no longer offers robust explanations for the increasingly complex and elusive structures and processes of organizational phenomena” (Keleman and Hassard, 2003: 79). Further, as Weick (1995: 127) has argued “most models of organization are based on argumentation rather than narration yet most organizational realities are based on narration”. If these realities are to be a constitutive part of organizational research then a sophisticated theoretical and methodological understanding of narrative is critical.

Methodologically, narrative provides a means of engaging with the experience of organizing – it answers the calls for “increased attention to local knowledge” (Kilduff and Mehra, 1997: 470) and practice driven theory (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina and von Savigny, 2000). As a result, the subjective realities of organizational life might be addressed in temporalized context in lieu of scientific abstraction yet without giving up on theoretical reflection and sophistication. Narrative research is, by and large, an empirical tradition that examines how experience is reflexively constructed into stories that may or may not be commensurate. It provides a methodological position through which to engage not with a presumed neutral ‘real’ world, but with the complex nuances of the ‘lived’ world.

An Unfinished Story

At the outset of this paper we stated that our goal was to tell a story about narrative research. In approaching this task we explored the development and maturation of the use of narrative to inform theory and methodology in terms of the dramatic tension between science and stories. This tension has characterized the story of narrative from the beginning. The earliest studies of narratives in the 1970s had to be defended against claims that it was improper to pay attention to stories in the social sciences (Mitroff and Killman, 1976). Stories were regarded as being of relatively little value because they did not conform to popular social scientific stereotypes of ‘what constituted theory’ (Eisenhardt, 1991). Indeed, to this day it is palpable that organization studies privileges argumentation (Weick, 1995) and abstraction (Pearce, 2004) over engagements with the meaning of experience; the latter being what narrative approaches are best equipped to address. Narrative approaches recognize that “all behavior is historical” and that such behavior “takes place over time and in particular contexts” (Zald, 1996: 256). This contrasts to “most of our mainstream journal articles [which] are written as if they apply to some disembodied abstract realm ... as if the paper dealt with some timeless entity” (p.256).

It must be noted that the focus on narrative in relation to science, that we have performed in our discussion, is important because it is within this relation that the story of narrative research has developed in organization studies. The legacy of positivism in this field has meant that the emergence of narrative, as a new approach, has had to enter a field characterized by the historical dominance of a positivistic or quasi-positivistic scientific rationality. In this process narrative has often been merely dismissed. The story we have told is intended as a rebuttal of such a position.

However, not all critiques of narrative emerge from the organizational studies strongholds of (quasi) positivism. Critiques of narrative and discourse based knowledge have also emerged in relation to realist ontologies. Habermas (1992), for example, issues a stern warning about the consequences of “turning science and philosophy into literature” (p. 226). In response to what he sees as poststructuralism’s concerted effort to blur, or even obliterate, genre boundaries, Habermas maintains that the traditional demarcation between science and narrative/literature is still important. He argues that science needs still to rest on some idea of validity instead of taking a discursive approach where “all validity claims becomes immanent to particular discourses” (p. 209). His argument rests on the principle that science genres differ from literary genres because “what is said in the text [...refers to...] something in the world” (p. 224). Like ourselves, Habermas is clearly aware that many a productive scientist has had the ability to tell a good story, but he adds that this is not sufficient for science. Scientific texts, for Habermas, should always be focused on making validity claims with respect to the goings on in the world and, concomitantly, that the difference between genres should not be liquidated.

The implication of Habermas’ argument for our own discussion comes down to a consideration of how we might understand the nature of that which we investigate. The suggestion is that discursive based knowledge systems fail to account for the ‘reality’ of the

world. Most generally this rests on a presupposition that realism is necessary for any ‘sane’ science. As Searle (1995) describe it, this realism is about defending “the idea that there is a real world independent of our thought and talk, and [...] defending the correspondence theory of truth, the idea that our true statements are typically made true by how things are in the real world that exists independently of the statements” (p. xiii). From the point of view of social science, realism also postulates that “it is possible to achieve knowledge about this reality” (Brante, 2001: 168)

The emergence of critical realism in the philosophy of science (Bhaksar, 1978, 1989) and its take up in organization studies (see Reed, 1998; 2004) are another means through which realism has been defended and the collapse of knowledge into language disputed. Critical realism offers a critique of positivism that is quite different to that of the discursive/narrative mode that we have been discussing here. Indeed, Reed (1998) positions critical realism directly against discursive approaches based on social constructivism. For him the distinction between reality and knowledge is crucial, and “the material and social worlds of which we are constituent [...] cannot be treated as if they are ultimately dependent on [...] consciousness or language” (Reed, 2004: 415). Although we are not going to resolve disputes between discursive/narrative constructivism and realism here (see Tsoukas, 2000), the point we make is that narrative approaches are not only characterized by internal diversity but are also contested from various perspectives.

In a traditional sense, stories end when the key tension that informs them comes to a climax and is resolved. In the case of our story no such resolution appears immanent. If anything, what we would like to achieve with this paper is the maintenance of the tension. As Kearney (2002) has argued, “truth is not the sole prerogative of the so-called exact sciences. There is also a truth, with its corresponding understanding, that we may properly call ‘narrative’. We need both” (p. 148). While the history of organization studies has been

dominated by an attempt to emulate the exact sciences, the implication of Kearney's argument is that such hegemonic moves are misguided; hubristic even. As we have seen, narrative can provide a different, and valuable, form of knowledge that enables researchers to engage with the lived realities of organizational life – the 'truth' that people at work live through every day. This is not a knowledge that aspires to certainty and control but rather emerges from a reflection on the messy realities of organizational practice (Czarniawska, 2003). It is this embodied and lived knowledge that narrative methods enable researchers to access and engage with while embracing scholarly values.

The issue for organization theory is that while the value and productivity of narrative knowledge has been demonstrated time and time again, this has been accomplished despite the dominance of positivistic (natural scientific) schema. If we who study organizations are to take the lives of others seriously and sympathetically – as a means to understand rather than to control, to accept ambiguity rather than demand certainty, and to engage with lived experience rather than to abstract from it – then the turn to narrative needs to be continued. It is our hope is that this paper will contribute to broadening the space for such knowledge.

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Notes

ⁱ. Although not our main focus, it is worth noting that as well as using narrative as a methodology to inform the study of organizations, researchers have also studied cultural narratives about organizations. This has included research into how organizations are

represented in literary novels (Czarniawska-Joerges and de Monthoux 1994), popular culture (Hassard and Holliday 1998), television (Rhodes 2001b; 2002) and science fiction (Smith, Higgins, Parker and Lightfoot 2001).